

Cover Me

Living, Loving, and Learning Through Loss

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PublishAmerica
Baltimore

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First printing

At the specific preference of the author, PublishAmerica allowed this work to remain exactly as the author intended, verbatim, without editorial input.

ISBN: 1-4241-1712-7
PUBLISHED BY PUBLISHAMERICA, LLLP
www.publishamerica.com
Baltimore

Printed in the United States of America

When I was low, you lifted me up. When I felt like crying, you made me smile. When I wanted to be enraged, you showed me how much better peace felt. When I wanted to keep it all to myself, the endurance of our friendship showed me why I had to write it down. I hope one day you will understand how much your presence in my life has meant to me. I hope that day is today.

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Prologue

For all those who have lost someone they love, my heart goes out to you and the book itself is dedicated to you, but the honor goes to my two best friends who lost their lives at such an early age. As well as to the others I have lost along the way. The three men whose stories I tell here are not the only loved ones of mine who have passed on and out of my life, but their lives and even their deaths had the most impact on my life, my soul and my spirit. Living with them, learning about them and loving them made me mostly what I am today. Living through the losses of these three guys that most of us loved but all of us admired has also had a great impact on the relationships our circle of friends' shares. As we mill about in our daily lives even to this day perhaps some do not realize that we have attained a higher plateau in the friendships we have in common. We have seen how one another lives, how we love, how we play and how we survive but there were days when we had to witness in each other how we grieved. As close friends of course we have the tendency to shelter or protect the people around us from some of our hardships and pain but in those days around those incredible losses we suffered we witnessed in each other our own personal of lowest moments. Questioning your mortality is likely not a first time thing for most people, even some of the youngest ones, but doing so while seeing the same bleakness reflecting from the eyes of your strongest and closest companions is perhaps somewhat of a forced moment of reckoning. One of those timeless minutes where at once we realize that indeed, we are all in this together.

Nowhere in these pages will I pretend to understand exactly how you feel. No one knows that but you. I will however, take you on a journey through life and death, and with the deepest of wishes, hope that you will understand things that may have been out of your reach before this book found its way to you. Let these experiences help you grow, instead of hindering you.

Life is a fragile thing to all of us. Sometimes it takes a tragic loss to bring this point home to you. I will not preach my beliefs to you, or try to tell you that it will get better with time. Better? It's not likely that the word better will

ever come to describe this difficult phase of your life. But with patience and some good coping skills the pain will become more bearable as time carries you through new memories and comforts you with the old ones.

In this book I will tell you three stories of personal losses I have lived through, from age 17 to age 27. It will seem hard to believe but in each and every one of those stories is a smile, a warm feeling and an all encompassing feeling of peace. It may have taken me years to reach them in some cases, but each and every moment of pain that I suffered short of the losses themselves, was worth it. In the end of this book I will share those moments, the ones that brought me to my knees in happiness and peace that I searched so hard for from the day I lost my first friend. I am writing it in hopes that my hard earned lessons will ease your transition as well. Things it took me 10 years of struggle and pain to learn can be shared here with you. If I save one person one moment of unnecessary pain, then I am satisfied and the deaths of my friends and the lessons I learned from them were never in vain. I want to show you how to look for the things that may comfort you and give you the closure you may need now, and exactly where to find them. I will not pretend that it is easy. As a matter of fact I want to make it clear that this is likely the hardest journey that life has ever taken you on. I will however pledge one thing, that you will come to the end of this passage and be a different person than what you were before you faced this loss. Death does different things to different people. We are not all so lucky as to have a wonderful counselor by our sides. We are not all so lucky as to have a guidebook with which we can decipher our emotional tribulations in facing such tragedies. One thing we are all lucky to have though, is friendships and families that endure these heartbreaking trials. Even though these things should be enough to carry us through the heartbreak, occasionally we need the wisdom of an outside voice, one that isn't so close to the heart. I only hope that no matter what you learn from the following pages, that you take from it a lesson that I have learned. In doing so, you will be saving yourself a lifetime of relative despair. You may be saving yourself worlds of pain by just reading these words and trying to feel yourself within them.

Although it might seem to be, the following pages are not about my individual pain in particular. They are about human pain, human suffering and the very human emotion of love. The most important thing to go into this book with is the awareness of one truth. Just because you have lost someone dear to you, it does not mean the love is gone. Indeed, the love has not even been altered, it lies within the very same place that it did before you suffered

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this loss. The only difference is that right now, it lies beneath a place that is aching with emptiness. That place is your heart, spirit and soul. That place deserves to be uncovered and cherished just as it was when this life that you valued so much was available to you as it sadly never will be again. It is of utmost importance to appreciate the entire journey, before you can learn to value the destination, the end of this journey you never wanted to embark on. Let my mistakes help you to understand why the pain seems to be intolerable, but that in the end, it is that very pain that will help you to gain the knowledge that will carry you through the rest of your life past these devastating days of loss to a place that is more comfortable and enduring. Under that hollow aching pain in your chest you still have a heart, soul and spirit that needs to be uncovered and sent back to work in the world that so desperately needs it.

Loss

It's hard to describe in words what the loss of a loved one feels like. Perhaps these feelings are now familiar to you as well. The loneliness, anger, sadness and confusion just to start, just a small handful of the emotions you experience. What about the physical pain? Some people would like you to believe that you can not possible be experiencing physical pain, even from such a great loss. "It is just stress and anxiety." For them you may not want to take the extra time to convince, because to you, the ache in your chest is very real. After all, your grief is yours. You know what it feels like. What about the racing heartbeat? You know the one. The one you felt when you learned you had lost someone near to you. It's the same throbbing heartbeat that you can almost hear because of its force and intensity. The same pulling, sinking feeling in your chest, right over your heart, you feel when your mind is racing through the memories of your lost love. Those are real, not just your imagination. Those are the pains that will force you to realize, if you didn't already know, that the one you lost, was one you had truly loved. If you are now questioning whether or not you loved this person enough, or whether you felt what you should have for them, then let those feelings of loss and pain be the reminder that undeniably, you did love them enough and cherish them enough. Pull some comfort from that knowledge, you will need it.

The first few days you will likely feel that you are living in a fog, a blur. You will spend a lot of time thinking about things that never seemed so significant before. A passing moment spent with your loved one, an argument you may have had, a certain look this person had on their face one day in particular. A lot of the time for some people, these thoughts will begin to create more sadness, possibly feelings of guilt. Those are the same memories that will serve to honor your loved one in the days, weeks and years to come. Hold onto those even when they still hurt a little bit. We will talk more about those later.

I want you to understand that whatever you are feeling right now, and as horrible as this type of experience can be, you will learn from it. What you

take away from it is entirely up to you. There are thousands of ways that we can leave this earth and death is a part of our lives. But just because the people around you may be used to death and perhaps not prone to grieve openly at all, does not mean that what you are feeling or acting out, is abnormal. I am going to share with you my first experience with the death of a young man who meant a lot to me.

When I was 17 my best girlfriend in the world, Janet, 19, found out she was pregnant with her first child. Her fiancé at the time was someone I had known since I was around 12 years old. Paul, 22 at that time, was what I would call a tough love type of friend. He was the type of guy that would be the first one to tell you to straighten up when you were being a wild and careless person. I respected him for his straightforward attitude. I was so happy for both of them! Every moment I was not at work, I was at her house. I was more than ecstatic the day she gave birth to their daughter, Ashley. Paul was so blissful. He loved his daughter from the day she was conceived. To see him holding her was to know that you were watching a love develop that nothing would ever divide. Not even death.

A bit over a month after Ashley was born, Paul returned from a doctor's appointment with terrifying news. A lump that had been surgically removed from his neck weeks earlier came back positive for cancer. Because of the type of cancer he had, it was recommended to him to immediately start some pretty intensive chemotherapy. He was given a dire prognosis with around 6 months to live.

I was shocked and upset; Janet was frightened and more often than not had the look of controlled terror on her face. I did what I could to comfort her, but even I knew at that moment, that it could never be enough. Trying was all I could do, sometimes that is all that is needed. I kept a vigilant watch on her for signs of breakdown. I would be there to pick up every piece the second she crumbled. I could do no less for Janet, for Paul and for Ashley. Paul, he was himself, tough, unwavering and untouched on the outside by what he had just learned. He even refused to quit his job at a local restaurant. That restaurant was a few miles from his house, and he rode a bike to it everyday before he found out he had cancer, and then after that too, until the disease took all the strength from him. Anyone that knew Paul knew that he was one of, if not the strongest one of us all. It was an ugly moment in my life. What was left of my carefree innocence was stripped the second I realized that the toughest person I knew would be destroyed by something so seemingly small. So larger than life Paul was, and here I had to watch life itself destroy him. The person I had

been before was gone. The unbreakable girl I had been just received her first crack in the iron will she had so prided herself on. Paul was a universe stronger than I was. When he broke the news to us, he had no reservations about letting us know it was going to kill him, and fast. Mortality had just kicked in the door on my life and there could not have been a more undesirable visitor at that time. I feared that watching him weaken, would weaken my own resolve in life. I feared it would kill some of the fragile hopes I had barely hung onto through a difficult childhood. I was so naive in those fears and naïve was never a word used to describe me before. Those were not doubts exactly, they were an inevitable consequence of watching someone you love and admire die. I could have let it change me, make me bitter and angry, but I decided right away to try to learn from it. I decided to observe in the most covert way that I could and prayed wholeheartedly that it would not make me into something I did not ever want to be.

Through months of chemotherapy we all watched him slowly fade away from us. I really had been a hard-hitting girl around my neighborhood, and I had never really crumbled publicly. Until those last few months of Paul's life, I had doubted I ever would. I remember one visit to the cancer center where Paul lived out the last few months of his life. I recall as if it were yesterday how I walked into his room, and where I had last seen about a week before a man who was still determined to cheat this disease of his death for so long, I found a shell. He was small and pale where before he was an imposing presence just to be near. I remember holding myself together for as long as I could. As I reached a seat, next to his father who was visiting at the time, I fell into it, literally crumbled myself. I couldn't look at my friend, I felt ashamed for seeing him so weakened. I felt embarrassed, because I couldn't hold myself together while the man next to me was a father watching his only son die before his eyes. I glanced at Tom's face while being annoyed with the tears I could not keep from falling from my eyes. He was smiling at me. He was offering a silent encouragement for me to be strong. I kept thinking that the last thing Paul would want would be for us to see him this way. This was not the man I loved and admired. This was a living ghost of the person I had known before. I knew in that moment that love, no matter how great or free it is, can hurt more deeply than I had ever imagined. Help him, my heart and soul cried bitterly. In that moment I understood how the feeling of helplessness can overwhelm the spirit until you have to dig amazingly deep just to make sure it was still there. So helpless was the feeling that no matter what I did, even if it was to give my very own life, I couldn't help Paul. He was

beyond help that this world has to offer. I remember bowing my head, partly to hide the tears and sobs, and partly to offer some prayer to someone, somewhere, anyone...anywhere, to please ease my friends' pain, whether it was through death or recovery. I finally understood how people could feel relief at the death of a loved one. It was still a painfully guilty feeling, but it took away the helplessness of the disease. It eased the burden of injustice we were all forced to witness. It was seconds after this personal discovery that I felt a hand on my back, stroking and soothing. As I looked to my right I found myself looking into Paul's fathers' eyes. Tom looked at me, smiled, and said that it would be alright. I thought then, that even though I was not so naive as to believe that things would be alright, I felt that it had to take incredible strength to be where Tom was at this moment, and comforting another. He was not really treating me as a father would treat a teenage girl, at that moment, he was my brother. I think I took away with me that day that in the lowest points we reach in our lives, such as moments like this, we are all brothers and sisters. Not there to judge or there to coddle, but to console one another on equal ground, sacred ground. Where people who love a single person gather to honor and ease the loved ones passage onto the other side.

It was also the same day that Paul, who was fading in and out of consciousness, woke up for a few minutes and made a very prophetic statement to all who were in his room that afternoon. "I will make it until Ashley's first birthday." It was as if he could sense our uncertainty at his words, his promise. He was angry with us for doubting him in that moment, but we had only to look at where the last few months had taken him to see that what he was stating seemed to be just a dream, though one we all desperately hoped he could fulfill. No one even spoke in that moment; we all just looked up at him. He was talking, that was odd enough at that moment. He had been mostly unconscious for the last couple of weeks. Looking around at each of us, you could tell he couldn't exactly focus, but directly speaking to each of us and we knew it. "I will make it, I promise." He acknowledged to us at that moment what we had all feared but was scared to face. He would die, and in the near future. But even he had a goal. If we could all be so strong and goal oriented in life as he was near death, we would be more than blessed human beings.

Even the friends I had gone to visit Paul with that day were taken aback by the intensity of my emotions. Leaving there that day we were all shattered a bit more than we were when we arrived. I blamed myself a little for their break downs too, because we do tend to have an effect on those around us. I knew if I had come out of that hospital trying to crack jokes and lighten the mood,

the others would have traveled that road with me. I could not though, not that day. I made the subconscious decision to let my grief free for that moment. A while later I considered that same fact, and decided then that I would always be very careful as to when I would keep things to myself and try to save others from more pain or heartbreak. Isn't that exactly what Tom had done for me, in that weak and hollow moment? Instead of letting my overemotional state drive him to tears, he had pulled out his strength and carried me through that moment. Yes, I would be stronger because of that day. I had learned an important lesson about human nature in that moment. Although we were all in the same agonizing emotional state, at that moment, another person near me had a tad more strength than I could collect for myself. He gave that strength to me. He gave to me something I could never return, or at least that was how it felt at that moment. Years later I learned how to give it back. Perhaps I was not able to give it back in a moment that it would have been far more treasured, more needed, but give it back I would, and ten-fold.

Around 3 months after Paul's prophetic statement, we found ourselves again in the cancer center celebrating the first birthday of his daughter Ashley. Paul, the 80 or 90 pound shell of his former self was there with us, but unconscious and on very high doses of pain medication. We celebrated her birthday from around 8 pm that night. I remember leaving not too long after arriving and telling Janet that I was there for her if she needed me, she only had to call. We had been friends for 8 years or so by that night. I left with a renewed faith in the human spirit. Paul was so unaware of what was going on in that room that night, or was he? He had kept his word. It was an incredible prediction fulfilled. For all appearances it seemed he was already gone from us, yet his heart still beat, his breath still filled his lungs and we felt a bit more complete in those moments. His life had come full circle in that last year. Not in the way we want our lives to be returned to us, but in the way we want to have some control over a situation that is unmanageable.

That November, not quite a year since Rob had been diagnosed with cancer; the phone rang and woke me out of a dismal dream. It was 4am and only a few hours after I had left the cancer center, and only 4 hours after the date of Ashley's birthday, and Janet was on the other end of the phone.

"He's gone Joy," she said. I could feel the pain and I could feel the relief in her heart as if it were my very own. I think that was the first full breath I had taken in months.

"Ok. I am sorry Janet, so sorry. He did do what he said he would do. He made it. He loved you. He loved Ashley. I love you. I am here anytime you need me."

“I know he did. I love you too Joy. I’ll talk to you later today.”

I think I learned the same thing that a lot of people learn when they have an experience with cancer or other diseases that take a loved one. I’ve learned to humble myself. Paul had been alive at what seemed to be the peak of his young life at age 22 that December he found out he had cancer. He died at age 23 the following November.

Yes, I could be the strongest person in the world too, just as he was. And I could wake up one day and find out I had less than a year to live and be so shaken that I could not pick myself up out of bed. I just don’t think that’s how it is for them, the Paul’s of the world. I think whether you are Christian, Buddhist, Islamic or even agnostic, when we are faced with our own mortality, as we are when a loved one has a fatal disease, we tend to find an inner peace, a safe place where we know we do not have to fear death, only live the life we have left. Although Paul couldn’t beat the disease and win his life back, he did beat it and keep something that was dear to him, a simple promise. That is one of those memories you have to savor. I know if you have suffered a similar loss, through a disease that prolonged your emotional pain and your loved ones physical pain, that you have a couple of those memories too. A moment of strength or depth where you could only see bleakness, but your loved one, ill and weakened showed you just how strong it was possible to be. The same place that maybe you found yourself losing faith, and had a moment where you couldn’t even deny yourself that. Those memories, the ones that hurt to watch, are the same ones that will honor the life and death of the ones you lose.

As I said, I will not write these words that mean so much to me and mingle them with false hopes or overly optimistic feelings that would be trying to reach cloud nine for you right now. But I do mean to tell you that you will have some of your faith and hope restored before its all said and done. You will heal, perhaps fully and perhaps never really feeling quite the same. It is perfectly acceptable to come to the realization that your life may never be the same again. It is likely it will not be. It is only up to you which path you allow it to take. It is in the best interest of your own spirit to allow these moments to teach you, instead of take from you.

When Paul first passed away, that memory of his promise used to bring me to full sobbing tears. These days, many years later, that same memory brings a smile to my face, sometimes with a prick of tears behind my eyes, but always with the smile and comforting feeling that I silently begged for when the pain was so fresh. So many people suffered Paul’s loss more than I did. In

those moments I couldn't fathom what it could feel like to those who had been so close to him, to his parents who remembered the little baby he had been. I hope Paul's parents take full responsibility for having raised a son, a man, into someone who could impact all the lives that he did in such short time. Without them Paul would not have been in our lives at all. Paul would have wanted us to continue to honor them in his memory. So I do. Does grieving for Paul ever get better? No, never better. Though now days it does inspire other feelings, comfort, love and honor. Honoring his memory by keeping that on the surface does him far more justice then tossing a rose on his headstone would ever do for me. Everyone grieves differently, but there is one goal in mind always. "How can I honor my friends' memory?" That's how, do whatever you do that gives you that comfort, that smile filled with tears, a giggle over a memory that you no longer feel guilt for feeling. This is healing, that's how it works and there is no set time for anyone, there is no grief clock ticking, and no one can tell you "It's been a long time" or "He/she would want you to move on." You do those things on your own time. Healing is for you, not for what others think it should be.

Coming to terms with your loss

There are people who grieve that can do so while still going about their daily business. There are others who are nearly crippled by the loss of someone they loved. No one is wrong or abnormal; they just experience strong emotions in different ways. There is no set way to mourn. It is of utmost importance to the mental health of either type of person to realize this fact right away. The following suggestions are specifically for the initial actions and reactions to the death of your loved one. Coming to terms with the loss, the permanence of it, immediately, will help you to get through the days ahead.

Forget what people think. This is your time to honor the life of your loved one. You know what was important to your loved one. If saving stray animals was a passion for your friend or relative who passed on, then donate something to a local animal shelter in their name. If roses were their favorite flower, buy a dozen and write out the card to the one you are missing. Put them on your coffee table and remember when you feel like remembering. Do what you can to honor what you know was in their heart.

If you feel like doing it and just haven't allowed yourself to, then go ahead and cry as much as you want to. Find somewhere private to do it if you don't

feel comfortable displaying emotions in front of others. This is no longer a male only issue. A lot of young girls have learned to or have been taught to hide their emotions as well. It is perfectly fine to be self protecting and to control your feelings in public places. This is not the time to hide them from your self. Now is the time to cry out louder then the hollow ache in your chest is making itself heard and felt.

Gather some memories. Find a picture, a T-shirt, an old toy, anything that will keep the memory of your loved one near you. Put it in a place that is special to you. Although it may not be the best thing for your mental health at this point to surround yourself with so many memories that you can not look left or right without crying, it is good for your soul to have a quiet peaceful place where you can take out a box of memories and contemplate them, shed a tear over them and just in general remind yourself that the love for your lost one still lives as long as it is in your heart. This is also a good way to measure your grief and how far you have grown from this desperate moment in time. Today, those old toys and your loved ones favorite keychain may bring you to bawling tears, but tomorrow, a year from tomorrow or ten years from tomorrow you may sit down in that same spot with that same box full of memories and just smile. It will happen, be as patient as you can by knowing that you will reach that day in the future.

Write down your feelings. Keep a brief journal. Even if the entry reads, "Today was horrible, I miss him/her!" You will not regret it in the days and years to come. Keeping a record of your feelings will only prove to you in later days how much you have grown, how far you have come since those tragic moments that passed through your life. Having proof of your emotional development is a good reminder that without a doubt, we do learn, even from the most horrifying moments in our lives.

Find another person who is suffering the same loss you are. It will ease the suffering a bit if you have someone who can understand directly what you are going through. We are not looking for friends in misery. We are looking for brothers and sisters in pain, and doing what we can to share in our own, and ease theirs a bit while we go. It is important to make sure that you are sharing these moments, not completely unloading your emotions on them, while they suffer in silence. Make sure anyone you are offering comfort to gets it. In moments of silence, repeat what you heard them say. In your own words, reflect their emotions back to them. "I can tell you really loved her, she had a great friend in you, I am sure she knew it." Do not expect to receive the same back from them, and if you do, make sure they know how much you

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